

Purple Heart awarded to WWII vet after 59 years

BY MASTER SGT. DAVID HALVORSON

Team Kirtland Career Assistance Advisor

Recently I had the honor and privilege of taking part in a rare and humbling occasion, as a small cadre of people from TEAM KIRTLAND accompanied Col. Kathleen Close, 377th Air Base Wing commander, to present the award of the Purple Heart to a local hero, Tech. Sgt. Jose Herrera.

His story is all the more intriguing since the award was for wounds received in combat *over 59 years ago!* Yes, there's a bit of history behind this quiet, unassuming native of Las Vegas, New Mexico.

It began when Herrera volunteered for the Army Air Corp when Congress lowered the draft age from 20 to 18 on Dec. 11, 1942. Assigned as a radio operator and machine gunner to the 398th Bombardment Group, out of Nuthampstead, England, his crew set out on their 28th of the required 30 missions on Sept. 27, 1944, with a new bombardier and an additional navigator on board.

Procedures required that the bombardier pull the pins on the bombs once airborne, so they were ready to drop on target. On this fateful day, one of the phosphorous bombs they were carrying exploded in flight, forcing the entire crew to bail out, with Jose the last man to go.

The crew was short one parachute, and the additional navigator attempted, unsuccessfully, to bail out with another crewmember. When Jose landed, he injured two vertebrae in his lower back and was placed in a body cast for a grueling six-month recovery.

On a positive note, with the exception of the navigator and the injured Herrera, the rest of the crew survived the ordeal to complete the remaining two sorties and head for home. Eventually, Jose was transported back to the United States to the Army Convalescent Hospital at Fort Logan, Colo., where he was medically discharged on Sept. 24, 1945, one year after his final mission.

Upon returning to civilian status Jose, like many veterans, took advantage of his G.I. benefits and completed his college education. Upon graduation, he became a teacher, and is now retired after 33 years of dedicated service with New Mexico State University.

Only recently did the events of Sept. 27, 1945, come to the attention of a Board for Correction of Military Records. As a result, Herrera was awarded the oldest U.S. military decoration in current use, a medal whose beginnings date back to the Revolutionary War, when Gen. George Washington issued an order on Aug. 7, 1782, establishing the Honorary Badge of Distinction, otherwise known as the Decoration of the Purple Heart.

The quiet, but moving ceremony was held Jan. 30 in Las Vegas, at VFW Post 1547, and those in attendance, those who came to honor this man, represented a wide swath of American military history.

Present were veterans from all branches of the service, each having served in one or more major military actions, including World



Courtesy photo

Former Army Air Corps Tech. Sgt. Jose Herrera received the Purple Heart for his service in combat in 1944, during which he was wounded in the line of duty. The decoration was presented in Las Vegas, N.M., by Col. Kathleen Close, 377th Air Base Wing commander. Behind Close and Herrera is Master Sgt. David Halvorson.

War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm.

As master of ceremonies, I was fortunate to have a chance to talk at length with Herrera and his silence spoke volumes to me. Of course he was honored... and yes, this was a most heart-warming day for him, not only because he was receiving this long-overdue military merit.

I think that he was moved more by the many, many friends—fellow veterans, family members, and others—that had come out to pay tribute to actions taken by a man many years earlier, and in a

world that was far smaller than the one we know today.

Too soon the formalities were under way, and as the ceremony concluded, I couldn't say for sure if his eyes were just a bit misty or not, but there's no doubt that from where I stood, his shoulders were a tad straighter, his chin was set more firmly and the pride for his country was there for all to see.

I'm proud to say he wasn't alone in his reverie. God *has* blessed America, and we are fortunate to be able to serve and to play a part in maintaining the freedom that is enjoyed by so many.

Mildly ill child care program testing

A new program is now available for parents of mildly ill children enrolled in Kirtland AFB child care programs.

Funded by the Air Force, the program provides a person to care for children with noncontagious stages of illnesses or with mild respiratory illnesses.

The program is open only to children enrolled in one of the child development centers, the Family Childcare home care program or school-aged youth program at the Boys and Girls Club. It is not open to the entire base.

Kirtland AFB is the first of 24 installations to begin operating the pilot program for children two months to 13 years old.

The child care provider for the program has special training, including 16 hours relating to caring for mildly ill children. Care is limited to weekdays, 6:30 a.m.-6 p.m.

The first or only option for many parents with mildly sick children is to stay home from work. This program offers an alternative that is especially important for Air Force families in which one parent may be deployed, in training or on temporary duty away from home.

The premise of the test project is that lost duty time



Photo by Keith Pedersen

Raylene Howell is the caregiver for the Mildly Ill Child Care pilot program. Kirtland AFB is one of 24 bases testing the program Air Force-wide.

or work hours negatively impacts the mission.

Through the new program, parents pay fees only for their existing enrollment, no additional fees are attached to the program.

To use the new program, parents must enroll

in advance of participation and, with their child, must visit the program care provider's home before the care is required.

For detailed information about how the program works, to enroll, and to learn when the new care is appropriate to use and when it cannot be used, contact the Family Child Care office at 846-1802.

Gospel Fest slated Feb. 23

Celebrating African American Heritage Month, the annual Gospel Fest is Feb. 23, 3-5 p.m., at Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church at Gibson and University boulevards.

Local churches are participating in the program of praise and worship with special musical presentations.

For information, call Estine Lewis, 610-9641, or Anthony Becton, 265-6725.

OF NOTE

Briefings

Perfect your business look

Dress for Success Seminar is **Feb. 18** at the Family Support Center.

The seminar addresses mens' and women's apparel 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Register at 846-0741 to register.

Apply for federal jobs

Federal Jobs Application Preparation Workshop is **Feb. 19**, 1:30-4 p.m., at the Family Support Center.

Register at 846-0741.

Tour local area

Welcome to New Mexico Tour is **Feb. 21**, 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. The tour starting from the Family Support Center is to the Sandia Tram, Cottonwood Mall and Old Town.

Register at 846-0741.

Learn about long term care insurance

What is Long Term Care Insurance Seminar is **Feb. 24**, 1:30-2:30 p.m., at the Family Support Center.

Learn whether you need this type of insurance and how much it will cost.

Register at 846-0741.

Labor help offered

New Mexico Department of Labor Transition

Assistance Program concludes **today**, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m., at the Consolidated Support Building 20245.

Learn about disability transition

Disability Transition Assistance Program Seminar is **today**, 9-11:30 a.m., at the Family Support Center.

Register at 846-0741.

Veterans Affairs benefits briefed

Veterans Affairs benefits and entitlements are briefed **today**, 1- 4:30 p.m., at the Family Support Center.

Register at 846-0741.

Home-buying tips offered

Home Buyers Seminar is **today**, 1:30-3 p.m., at the Family Support Center.

Register at 846-0741.

Closings

Legal services not available Feb. 20, March 12-13

Legal service at the Kirtland AFB Legal Office is not available **Feb. 20** and **March 12-13**. Notary service is not available **Feb. 20**.

For emergency assistance or notary service, call 846-4217 during normal duty hours.